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# The Jimmy Savile revelations are causing a classic moral panic

From mods and rockers to child protection, society is prone to scares and panics. These can themselves be damaging

Vivienne Cree

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Mods invading the beach at Margate, Kent, waving sticks and throwing bottles at retreating rockers in May 1968. The battles prompted a 'moral panic' across society. Photograph: Keystone/Getty Images

In the midst of the ongoing revelations, investigations and resignations surrounding Jimmy Savile and Newsnight's blunder over Lord McAlpine, we need to take a step back from the furore and examine what is actually going on. We are in the midst of a classic moral panic. No one wins in such times; not the victims, the accused, the law, the media, or the public.

Society is prone to periodic scares and panics: hooligans and hoodies, mods and rockers, Münchhausen by proxy, bird flu, obesity, alcohol and drugs. The list goes on.

One recurrent theme in these scares is the focus on [children](#), and allegations of threats and harm done to them. Those who are said to have harmed children are pilloried in the media and across society. Those who are meant to protect children are blamed for failing to do so. Social workers are often embroiled in these events, blamed for doing too much or too little, or even accused of being the abusers.

At all these times, there is pressure on government, police and others to do something – this is often punitive and may be out of proportion to the actual harm done.

Calling something a moral panic is not to suggest that nothing bad has happened, that no one died of avian flu (some have) or that no children have been sexually abused (sadly, many have). But the response is out of all proportion to the actual threat.

In the case of Jimmy Savile, it is likely that some vulnerable people (children and those in care settings) were sexually assaulted. But it is less certain whether all those currently alleging abuse were, just as it is not clear yet whether he was at the centre of a paedophile ring involving a large number of other prominent figures.

Again, this is not to minimise the harm that may have been done. Child sexual abuse is always unacceptable and can have extremely damaging, long-term consequences for the victims.

However, it must be acknowledged that scares and panics can in themselves do harm. People like Lord McAlpine are wrongly drawn into the maelstrom, as well as those who have less clout and are less able to protect themselves from the onslaught. The widely held idea that "there can be no smoke without fire" can lead to people drawing conclusions on the basis of little or no evidence. The eventual result can be the scapegoating of individuals and groups and punitive and excessive measures of social control (legislation and policies – like the Dangerous Dogs Act, for example).

So what is really going on here? Ultimately, the Jimmy Savile story is about sex and children – and so to the media this story, while being abhorrent, sells newspapers and captures the public imagination. It was ever thus, as a historical look at previous scares shows us. It's also about trust – about trust in public bodies, in the BBC, politicians, the health service, the police, social workers. We blame the public bodies that are meant to protect us, to uphold the highest standards. In doing so, we look away from the other troubling things facing society today: the increasing gap between rich and poor, prisons bursting at the seams, children growing up in poverty, asylum seekers living in detention centres.

This isn't to suggest a simple conspiracy theory – it is a reality of life. By focusing on, for example, human trafficking, we ignore the reality that people are trafficked because of restrictive immigration policies that mean that it is almost impossible for many to enter the UK to work legally. By focusing on Jimmy Savile, we lose sight of the millions of children across the world who die each year for lack of clean water and the tens of thousands of children in the UK who grow up suffering from

hardship and neglect. The explosive incident will always get more attention than the duller, more complex bigger picture. And when we let that happen, everyone loses.

*Professor Vivienne Cree is head of social work at the University of Edinburgh, which is organising a series of seminars on moral panics and 21st century social issues*